DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 394 TM 012 948

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TITLE Life Events and Academic Performance: Instrument Design.
PUB DATE Feb 88
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Miami Beach, FL, February 24-27, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Biographical Inventories; Demography; Higher Education; Life Style; *Questionnaires; Student Characteristics; *Test Construction; *Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Life Events; *Life Events Academic Performance Questionnaire

ABSTRACT

In April 1987, a pilot study was undertaken to develop an instrument designed to assess the effects of life events on undergraduate students' academic performance. Focus was on the design and construction of the instrument--the Life Events and Academic Performance Questionnaire (LEAPQ). Subjects were 75 male and 75 female undergraduates at a large public university in the Northeast. Most academic departments at the university were represented in the sample. Students were administered the questionnaire at the time and place of university registration. The anonymously-completed instrument collected data on demography (age, sex, academic major, year in school, and place of residence) and life events (death, illness, accident or injury, financial history, housing background, personal and social life, psychological status, exposure to violence, substance abuse, and legal history). Seven subjects provided additional comments. Results indicate that: (1) life events chosen for inclusion in the instrument were appropriate; (2) administration and sampling procedures need refinement; and (3) reduction of instrument length would be beneficial. The LEAPQ is appended. (TJH)

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LIFE EVENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: Instrument Design

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association, Feb. 1988, Miami, Fla.

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The range of stressful life events with which people in general are faced is likely to be represented in the student population. Within the general population, these events have varying degrees of impact on normal functioning. The typical college population, is primarily comprised of people still in a significant developmental period with minimal adult life experience. Many are living away from home for the first time and experimenting with their own independent life management. It would not be surprising if significant life events were to have a more disruptive influence on the general performance of this population. There is a growing awareness of the difficulties that are related to such life experiences as living in an alcoholic family, parental divorce, physical and sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and acquaintance rape, as well as the more evident disruption from significant deaths, illness, and accidents.

It is unclear how much a general awareness of such difficulties is reflected in the institutional response to individual students. While there is often an understanding response from faculty and administrators, it is also not uncommon to hear the opinion expressed that the personal life of the student is not the concern of faculty and not to be considered in assessing flexibility in meeting academic requirements (e.g., rescheduled examinations, extended deadlines). It is also unclear whether negotiating such flexibility is perceived by students as inappropriate, either because of a perception of institutional unresponsiveness or because of a need to learn to get by on their own.

The interest of the authors in this topic was stimulated not only by their interactions with students over many years, but also from noting the high incidence of such events and their effect on academic functioning in a small group of 100 students with whom one author had weekly contact through their particpation in an experimental academic program.

PURPOSE

In April 1987 the authors conducted a pilot study designed to gain a better understanding of student life events and their impact on academic performance. This paper focuses on the design and construction of the instrument used by the authors in this research. (See Appendix A for a copy of the instrument)

METHODOLOGY

The Sample. The sample consisted of 150 M and F undergraduate students at a large public university in the Northeast. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire at the time and place of the University registration process. A member of the Counseling Center staff handed each student a questionnaire and requested their help by completing the questionnaire. Students were instructed to turn their anonymous questionnaire in when they ahd completed it and were ready to leave tha registration area. Most academic departments in the university were represented in the sample of students who completed and returned the questionnaire. Table I shows the distribution of Ss by sex and academic year. Although not evenly distributed students from all academic years were represented in the sample.

Table I. Distribution of Ss by sex and academic year

	Fresh.	Soph.	Jun.	Sen.	Total
Male	13	19	29	14	75
Female	22	24	23	6	75
Total	35	43	52	20	150

The Instrument

Demographic Information. Although Ss remained anonymous they were asked to supply informaiton regarding demographic variables which the researchers theorized might be related to particular life events and academic issues. These variables included: age, sex, academic major, year in school, and place of residence.

Directions to Ss. The front sheet of the questionnaire contained instructions regarding its completion. Ss were asked to cooperate, but knew that they did not have to complete the questionnaire if they were reluctant. It was also made clear on the front sheet and by the individual distributing the questionnaire that Ss should not sign the questionnaire, that it was meant to be anonymous.

The questionnaire contained a list of many typical life events that interfer with academic performance. For each event the S was asked to circle either Y(yes)of N(no) for whether he had experienced this event within the past year. If the S had experienced the event he was asked to check in the appropriate column to indicate how severely (severe, great, much, some, none) the event interfered with his academic performance. Next the student indicates by checking in the appropriate column the two main people to whom the student went for assistance. The options included: instructor, advisor, academic dean, dean of students, counseling center, freshman center, resident life staff, chaplain, family, friend or other. The S was also asked to indicate how helpful (very, some, not at all) each of these two resources had been. Lastly students were asked to indicate by checking the appropriate column whether they had asked for flexibility in meeting academic guidelines and if so whether it was granted. Finally students were encouraged to write on the back of the questionnaire any additional comments on anything they thought would be helpful in understanding the impact of life events on academic performance. The directions concluded by informing the Ss that they could discuss any part of the questionnaire with either of the authors, giving their on campus addresses.

Life Events. The life events identified in the questionnaire were grouped into 10 main categories: (1) death; (2) illness; (3) accident or injury; (4) violence; (5)personal and social; (6) psychological; (7) financial; (8) housing; (9) substance abuse; (10) legal. Each of thes areas included sub areas of concern. For example area (1) death was divided into a consideration of: (1) death of family member; (2) death of a friend; and (3) other. (Ss frequently made reference here to death of pets.)

ANALYSIS OF THE INSTRUMENT AND SAMPLING PROCEEDURES

Life Events. In general the authors are comfortable with the choice of life events included in the questionnaire. For future research in the area the authors are however considering adopting a new category of Academic Development, similar to that suggested by Beard, Elmore & Lange (1982). Within the life events included it would probably be advisable to make death of pets a separately identified category since so many Ss indicated experience with this life event. In category 10, legal, there were only 6 responses. The authors are considering deleting this category in future revisions of the questionnaire.

Comments. Only 7 Ss wrote additional comments on the back of the questionnaire. These 7 comments seemed to be more an airing of minor grievances with various aspects of the university bureaucracy than relevant statements about life events and academic performance. The authors will need to

rephrase the statement calling for comments if they hope to elicit more pertinent information.

Administration and Sampling. Further research in this area requires more scientific and sophisticated sampling and administration proceedures. Sampling should also consider the demographic variables discussed earlier, beyond sex and class. The administration of the instrument should occur in a calm stressless environment where Ss will have the opportunity to give thoughtful consideration to the items. Improvement in the administrative setting should also help to elicit more meaningful comments from the Ss.

Length of Instrument. The authors are looking into ways to reduce the length of the instrument without compromising the opportunity to gather important information. One possible approach for paring down the instrument would be to eliminate those areas that few Ss responded to as having experienced in the past year. The authors are also continuing to review the literature in this area in an effort to help them focus on those life events that previous researchers have found to be related to academic performance.

One area of obvious simplification relates to the question of whom students turned to for help and guidance. In the present instrument Ss were asked to check 2 categories of helpers. Future editions of the instrument should probably have Ss check only one source of assistance and guidance. This would simplify the appearance of the instrument considerably and thus facilitate the Ss response to it.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described a pilot study investigating the area of student life events and academic performance. Focus has been on the administration of the questionnaire, its design and suggested areas of improvement. The experience of this pilot study and the information gained has been invaluable in the design of future research in this area. Hopefully today's presentation will provide further encouragement and guidance from professional colleagues familiar with this area of research.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE

LIFE EVENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Your assistance in completing this questionnaire will be greatly appreciated. We are trying to understand more clearly the events that students experience that interfere with academic performance.

Do NOT sign your name - it is an anonymous survey.
Please do not discuss the survey while you are completing it.
Turn in the completed form at the end of Registration.

DIRECTIONS
(Please read before completing questionnaire)

On this form are list many typical life events or circumstances that may interfere with academic performance. For each, you are asked to circle either Y (yes) or N (no) in the Yes column to indicate whether you have experienced this situation within the past year. If you have experienced it within the past year, please indicate how severely you believe this event interfered with your academic performance (Degree of Effect). If you circled N, go right on to the next event.

For each event you have experienced, please indicate who were the two main people (1 and 2) to whom you went for assistance or guidance (if any), and how helpful each person was in either providing appropriate help or guiding you to someone else who could help.

These life events sometimes legitimately interfere with being able to meet fixed schedules and deadlines (e.g., of tests and papers). If this was the case for you, please indicate in the last column (Academic Flexibility) whether you requested some flexibility in meeting these responsibilities and, if you did so request, how flexible your instructor was able to be.

You can complete this questionnaire without writing additional comments in just a couple of minutes. However, we encourage you to write anything you believe would be helpful in understanding the impact of life events on academic performance on the back of the survey. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

If you would like to discuss anything about the survey after you have completed it, please contact either Dr. Janet Burke (Psychology Department) or Dr. Noel Cartwright (Counseling and Career Development Center).

PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION BEFORE ANSWERING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

AGE:_____ SEX: M F MAJOR: _____

YEAR IN SCHOOL (NOW): FRESH SOPH JNR SNR GRAD

RESIDENCE: HOME/RELATIVE RES. HALL OFF-CAMPUS, NOT HOME

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LIFE EVENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Yes	Degree of Effect						Life Event		Sought Assistance From												How Helpful			Academic Flexibility			
	Severe	Great	Much	Some	None				Instructor	Advisor	Academic Dean	Dean of Students	Counseling Center	Freshman Center	Res. Life Staff	Chaplain	Family	Friend	Other		Very	Some	Not at all	Not Requested	Very Flexible	Somewhat Flexible	Not Flexible
							I. Death																				
Y N							1. Family Member (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							2. Friend	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							3. Other (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
							II. Illness																				
Y N							1. Self-Brief (what_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							2. Self-Prolonged (what_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							3. Family Member (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							4. Friend (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
							III. Accident or Injury																				
Y N							1. Self (what_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							2. Family Member (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							3. Friend (who_____)	1:																			
								2:																			
							IV. Violence																				
Y N							1. Robbery	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							2. Physical Assault-Known Attacker	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							3. Physical Assault-Unknown Attacker	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							4. Repeated Relationship Violence	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							5. Acquaintance/Date Rape of Self	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							of Girlfriend	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							of Friend	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							6. Stranger Rape of Self	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							of Girlfriend	1:																			
								2:																			
Y N							of Friend	1:																			
								2:																			

LIFE EVENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Yes	Degree of Effect						Life Event		Sought Assistance From													How Helpful			Academic Flexibility			
	Severe	Great	Much	Some	None				Instructor	Advisor	Academic Dean	Dean of Students	Counseling Center	Freshman Center	Res. Life Staff	Chaplain	Family	Friend	Other	Very	Some	Not at all	Not Requested	Very Flexible	Somewhat Flexible	Not Flexible
							V. Personal and Social																					
Y N							1. Conflict with Parents	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							2. Conflict with Friends	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							3. Romantic Conflicts	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							4. Pregnancy - Self	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							- Girl friend	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							5. Abortion - Self	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							- Girlfriend	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							6. Relationship Problems - Self (including marital)	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							7. Ending of Relationship - Self (including separation/divorce)	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							8. Marital Conflict - Parents	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							9. Separation/Divorce - Parents	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							10. Getting Married - Self	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							11. Unresolved Conflict with Faculty	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							12. Sexual Harassment-at School	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							-at Work	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							-other (_____)	1:																				
								2:																				
							VI. Psychological																					
Y N							1. Depression for more than one week	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							2. Anxiety for more than one week	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							3. Recurrent anxiety attacks	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							4. Suicidal Thoughts	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							5. Problems focussing on goals	1:																				
								2:																				
Y N							6. Easy discouragement by poor grade	1:																				
								2:																				

LIFE EVENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Yes	Degree of Effect: Severe	Great	Much	Some	None	Life Event		Sought Assistance From: Instructor	Advisor	Academic Dean	Dean of Students	Counseling Center	Freshman Center	Res. Life Staff	Chaplain	Family	Friend	Other	How Helpful: Very	Some	Not at all	Academic Flexibility: Not Requested	Very Flexible	Somewhat Flexible	Not Flexible
Y N						7. Career Indecision/Confusion	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						8. Eating Disorder	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						9. Sexual Identity Problems	1:																			
							2:																			
						VII. Financial																				
Y N						1. Job Loss - Self	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						2. Change in Parental Finances	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						3. Need to work excessive hours	1:																			
							2:																			
						VIII. Housing																				
Y N						1. Roommate Conflicts	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						2. Forced Relocation during semester	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						3. Inadequate Housing	1:																			
							2:																			
						IX. Substance Abuse																				
Y N						1. Alcohol Problems - Parent(s)	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						- Self	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						- Other (_____)	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						2. Other Drug Abuse - Parent(s)	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						- Self	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						- Other (_____)	1:																			
							2:																			
						I. Legal																				
Y N						1. D.W.I. Arrest	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						2. Other Arrest	1:																			
							2:																			
Y N						3. Other Legal Involvement	1:																			
							2:																			

Please write any comments that you believe would be helpful in understanding your responses or helping students in such situations on the back of this page.

THANKYOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE !